

The problem of destructive scratching by cats

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Scratching is a common behavioral problem in domestic cats (1). In order to treat problem scratching behavior, it is necessary to understand why cats scratch, why specific objects are scratched, and alternative methods of dealing with the problem.

Cats scratch for two reasons. They use their claws to attack or to defend themselves, but most complaints about destructive scratching are as a result of territorial marking (2).

Some cats are born with a strong drive to mark territory. The most common methods of establishing and identifying territory are scratching, spraying urine, and depositing scent gland pheromones by rubbing objects.

Territorial marking can start at an early age, although the time of onset varies widely among individuals. It is an inherited, unlearned behavior, and its intensity, like onset, varies widely. The cat generally chooses a prominent, vertical object to scratch, and tends to return to the same location. The surface consistency, location, and possibly the appearance of the scratched object, as well as the scent from footpad gland secretions deposited previously at the time of marking, attract it back to a particular location. Territorial marking behavior may even be seen in cats living in single pet homes.

Although scratching does facilitate the natural shedding of the outer layers of the claw (1), it is not essential for this process. These older layers may fall off by themselves, or may be removed with the teeth. Scratching seems to be a pleasurable activity, and cats who have been declawed continue to go through the motion with no apparent loss of enjoyment or reduction in frequency of the behavior.

There are two major approaches to resolving a problem of destructive scratching in cats. They are: supplying an appropriate scratching post in the correct location or, if this fails, surgical removal of the front claws. Declawing is considered a more humane alternative than abandoning the cat or having it euthanized.

The cat must be given an acceptable (from both the cat's and the owner's point of view) object to scratch. Problem scratching usually occurs in cats that have not been supplied with an acceptable scratching post, or who have found an object more to their liking.

Cats have definite requirements for a scratching post. The scratching post should be located close to where the cat sleeps, as most cats mark territory near

their sleeping area. The cat must also feel that the post is located in a prominent position, as there is no sense in marking territory in a location that is not noticeable. The preferred covering should have a definite longitudinal weave or grain, which allows the cat to dig its claws in and get a long stroke. The post must be taller than the cat when it stands on its hind legs, and sturdy enough not to tip over. It should have a corner (4" × 4"), as many cats like to scratch on both sides at once (2).

In dealing with destructive scratching in cats, it is important to first attempt behavior modification by supplying an appropriate scratching post. Declawing should be considered a humane alternative which, in many cases, is necessary to save the cat from euthanasia

In training a cat to use a scratching post, it is important to remember that cats are drawn to previously scratched objects by both sight and scent stimuli. The cat should be taken to the appropriate object and the paws gently rubbed on the post to distribute the scent secretions from the footpads. If the cat has chosen furniture to scratch, the item should be temporarily moved and the scratching post placed in that location. The scratching post should be covered with a material similar to that having been scratched previously. Until the problem is resolved, the furniture should be covered with plastic, or treated with a small amount of powdered mothball crystals, to make it a less attractive object. Once the cat is consistently using the scratching post, it can be gradually moved to a more convenient location.

Declawing is another method to deal with destructive scratching behavior. Although it is a distasteful concept to many, there is no evidence that the surgery has any long-term, detrimental effects on the cat. However, there has been a great deal of controversy over the moral legitimacy of this procedure.

Opponents of the procedure feel that altering the animal by declawing it is morally reprehensible. They feel that the temporary pain and discomfort, the risk of surgical complications, and the stress of hospitalization are unacceptable. They also maintain that fighting and climbing effectiveness are both reduced after

recovery, and that the cat is therefore at risk in any outdoor situation.

The advantage of declawing is that it is an immediate and permanent solution to the problem of destructive scratching. Additionally, the cat exhibits no significant change in behavior after the surgery, and it does not contribute to, or cause an increase in, territorial marking (Landsberg GM, Personal Communication).

We feel that declawing is not a cruel procedure. It appears to have no adverse psychological effect on the cat, as the scratching behavior still occurs; declawing simply removes the claws which cause the destruction of furniture or drapes. The adjustment is rapid. Cats realize their limitations in several days. The back claws are never removed, so they are still able to climb trees. Cats use their teeth as their primary weapon in defense and hunting, so these behaviors are not significantly affected by declawing. Hunters may be less efficient after declawing, but this can be either an advantage or a disadvantage. Although there is some temporary postsurgical pain, the amount of discomfort seems to be related to the age of the cat. A study in which young kittens were declawed found no evidence of developmental problems and little post-

surgical pain (3). Of course, it would be wrong to routinely declaw kittens (as one would remove dew-claws on puppies) because many cats do not develop this destructive behavior. The ideal solution is to declaw the cat in conjunction with another surgery. If destructive scratching behavior is evident at six months of age, declawing should be considered at the time the cat is neutered. A surgical procedure which eliminates a major behavioral problem and which has no lasting behavioral, psychological, or physical effects cannot be considered unacceptable in any way.

In dealing with destructive scratching in cats, it is important to first attempt behavior modification by supplying an appropriate scratching post. If this is not effective, declawing should be considered a humane alternative which, in many cases, is necessary to save the cat from euthanasia.

References

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NUTRITION

ALIMENTATION

Lite diets

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Introduction

The word "lite" appeared in the common lexicon about a decade and a half ago as a descriptor for beer which had a decreased level of sugar and hence a decreased level of energy.

The word itself is confusing because it does have the same inference as "calorie-reduced" but does not have the same definite meaning. "Lite" has recently crept into the world of pet foods and veterinarians should be aware of what it means and more importantly, what it does not mean. The common understanding is that any label bearing the title "lite" is a reducing or weight-management diet. Such may not be the case. The term as used leaves the impression that the product is a reducing diet or one intended for an overweight

dog. As the following indicates, veterinarians and clients alike should exercise some care in recommending or using these diets.

Obesity

Overweight or obesity has been the subject of research and speculation for decades. The common understanding (1) of obesity comes from the human literature and is defined as having a level of body fat 25% greater than normal (1,2). This distinguishes overweight from obesity in that overweight is simply weighing more than typical for a particular body type. A heavily-muscled athlete may be overweight but it would be imprudent to call that person obese. In humans, obesity is most commonly determined by indirect measure of subcutaneous fat by doing a skin-fold measurement. In pets, the equivalent measure has been described by Lewis and Morris (3) which requires palpation of subcutaneous fat over the ribs of a standing animal.

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